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This chef made a steampunk chocolate dress you can eat



ERIN NEGLEY | Staff Writer Oct 14, 2015 Comments





Chef Joe Cumm has worked with chocolate and all things pastry for more than a decade, but this challenge was a first: Make an edible outfit that was at least 60 percent borrowed from cake decoration.

And make sure a model could wear this creation for four hours without it falling apart.

“Let me see if I can do it,” Cumm said.

The local pastry art instructor created a flexible chocolate he could cut like fabric.

He made a steampunk outfit with a patterned short skirt, a corset, jewelry and a hat with a working clock on the front — all from chocolate. The outfit made it down the runway, almost made it back to his classroom in Lancaster and made people look twice at the show.

“If you were standing five to six feet away, you would think it was leather,” said Tina Wright, producer of the fashion show at [Americas Cake & Sugarcraft Fair](#) in Orlando, Florida, last month.

Cumm, a pastry art instructor at the [Pennsylvania School of Culinary Arts](#) in Lancaster, didn’t discover the world of creative cakes until his 30s.

He studied math and engineering in college, but realized those fields weren’t for him.

He eventually found a way to use that science background to bake a 3-D Winnie-the-Pooh cake for his daughter’s first birthday. Cumm loved the creative side of baking and went back to school.

Now the 48-year-old chef, who lives in the Reading area, has more than a decade of experience as a pastry chef and instructor.

Cumm travels to teach at pastry shows and give demonstrations.

He’s also brought home some accolades. Last year, he won the [King of Cones challenge](#) on the Food Network, and he won first place in the [tiered cakes category](#) at Pastry Live in Atlanta in August.



The fashion show kicked off the The Americas Cake & Sugarcraft Fair hosted by Satin Ice, a weekend of cake competitions, demonstrations and classes.

Organizers created the show with a 60-foot runway to grab the attention of people who made cakes for a living and

those who bake as a hobby. The show also tied in with [New York Fashion Week](#) and brought pastry away from the platter.

“When you see a finished cake, it’s very static,” Wright said. “Here, the models are walking around in outfits that are edible.”

The show invited pastry chefs and accepted applications for outfits containing at least 60 percent edible materials.

Show organizers narrowed the entries down to 10 candidates they felt could bring their sketches to life, Wright said. Most were cake decorators and Cumm was one of two pastry chefs.

He entered to give himself a creative push.

Cumm focused on steampunk style, funky, with mechanical influences. The look also combined his culinary skills with his engineering background.



Working at home, Cumm spent months tweaking the recipe. The chocolate couldn't melt and had to be flexible enough to fit a model he wouldn't meet until the day of the show.

First he tried **modeling chocolate**, kind of like chocolate clay that didn't melt. But it had to be smeared on a

chicken wire mold. Plus, it was thick and heavy enough for an entire outfit to weigh several pounds.

So Cumm experimented with the recipe, making it thinner and thinner with edible ingredients until it was flexible as a rubber band and didn't melt easily.

The skirt came together with strips of chocolate an eighth of an inch thick, decorated with gears and numbers airbrushed on with cocoa butter. Cumm wrapped the strips around a ring of plastic tubing and fastened it with grommets and rivets.

The only nonedible parts of this outfit were the hardware, a zipper, the white shirt and the model's boots.

The corset laced up with edible bamboo.

The chocolate gear necklace hung from the same bamboo.

The hat was made from the chocolate and had a working clock on the front.



Once the outfit was runway-ready, Cummins had to get his chocolate creation to Florida intact during a hot Indian summer.

He fit the hoop skirt into a wardrobe box and packed the chocolate hat and corset into his suitcase and drove south.

Luckily, he knew the chocolate held up to heat well. Cumm had brought the outfit to school in Lancaster and it survived during the summer's hottest days.

At the show, temperatures were kept low to help avoid a wardrobe malfunction.

"We had no major mishaps," Wright said. "Nothing broke. Nothing melted. Nobody fell."

Other chefs created their outfits from sugar: from fondant to wafer paper. One outfit looked like lace, but actually was piped royal icing. Cumm was the only chef to make something from chocolate.

"It was incredible, it was super flexible," Wright said. "It was incredibly detailed."

During the model fitting, he made a few fitting adjustments with scissors from his knife kit, laced up the back and sent the model down the runway.

After the show, the models walked around the audience for a bit and then the outfits were transferred to mannequins so visitors could get a closer look.

For the rest of the show, Cumm demonstrated tempering chocolate and making chocolate flowers, and networked to help his students find externships.

He filled the car for the ride back home and had to put the skirt wherever it would fit. The 16-hour-drive messed up the hoop, but the chocolate stayed intact.

Soon, he'll show students at the culinary school how to make the flexible chocolate.

In the meantime, he's made a chocolate purse for wife Eden and is preparing for another food fashion show in the spring.

"Now I have this flexible chocolate," Cumm said. "Let's see what creative things I can do with it."

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Crafting chocolate

Tips to make your own outfit (or something smaller) from chocolate, from pastry chef Joe Cumm

- Quality of chocolate is important. Chocolate chips found at grocery stores won't cut it.
- **Couverture chocolate**, high quality chocolate with extra cocoa butter, melts especially easily.
- Chocolate must be tempered to avoid a chalky or gray color. This step will also make a nice crisp break.
- High heat and moisture are enemies of your chocolate creation.